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The Equality March

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It is said that people rather than books that bring about change and there may be something to this because what happened in Półwiejska Street in Poznań on November 19, 2005 will always remain part of my inner biography. I know these are big words but I am still in a mild state of shock after yesterday's events, which I haven''t yet absorbed emotionally.

But let's begin at the beginning. Up on the top floor of the Old Brewery a conference is in progress. It is pleasant and friendly. During the final panel things get a little less friendly when "observers" from the All-Polish Youth (Młodzież Wszechpolska) arrive. Someone repeatedly tries to photograph us, the panelists. Marta Jermaczek attempts to talk to him and find out who he is. I am sitting too far to hear the outcome.

After the last panel we leave the conference room. I meet some women friends and ask about their mood. Pretty grim, they answer. They have just entered the Old Brewery and all around they have seen masses of police - on foot, on horseback, armored, take your pick. There is an awful lot of them. The whole vicinity of the Old Brewery has been surrounded. That's what martial law must have looked like, says one of the women.

We walk out onto a terrace and smoke. Someone suggests that instead of going down the escalators into Półwiejska Street we should take the back exit and cross the park where there are no football hooligans. The idea sounds dangerous because the football hooligans and All-Polish Youth might figure out what we're doing faster than the police. And anyway, some of us are already in Półwiejska.

We take the escalators down through one of the largest shopping malls in the city, and walk out onto Półwiejska. Along the way, I talk with a French journalist, trying to explain to her that in Poland there has never been a true left, though there are communist parties. She doesn't seem to understand this and says that in France there are right-wing politicians who are gay and out. It's different here. We agree to go out for coffee "when it's all over" to finish the conversation. But for reasons outside my control I will not be able to meet her again.

We go out into Półwiejska. I'm in the rear but I see that the demonstration has not made much progress before running into

a cordon of police who look like antiterrorists: shields, helmets, full gear. Another such cordon soon appears behind us. We are locked in a sort of rectangle in Półwiejska, with police front and rear; beyond them there are football hooligans shouting something about sending fags to the gas chamber. On the sides there are shops whose doors have already been locked. People call us on cellphones to say they have not been able to get through to join us. We are cut off.

The people at the front of the demonstration try to march on calling out: "peaceful demonstration," "freedom, equality, democracy," "say NO to hatred," and "this democracy is a joke." But the policemen with their shields won't budge. The hooligans throw eggs at us; someone mentions stones. It feels safest next to the shop windows: surely they won't throw stuff at the Brewery windows. Then the demonstration leaders change their tactic and we start walking around in a circle, shouting: "democracy all around." They're going to wait till we get tired, we think. Actually, the early part of the event feels like a picnic; we smoke, we talk. Except for the fact that policemen keep pacing around "our" rectangle and writing down people's personal information from their IDs.

The energy levels drop a little because there seems to be no way out. Someone waves a flag at us from a third-floor window and the crowd howls with joy. It is generally very loud: people call out through a loudspeaker; from time to time the football hooligans shout their fascist slogans; the police also make announcements through loudspeakers. It's getting dark. Some people, including me, light candles to commemorate the dying democracy in Poland. We keep walking around with the candles when it starts hailing and gets really cold. Some people make attempts to slip out of the rectangle and manage to get away. But I later hear from a friend that right before the end the police wouldn't let anyone else out.

Together with Lech, Dominika, and Agnieszka we try to get through to the organizers and suggest that they end the demonstration since there is nothing more we can do. It would be good to have some sort of symbolic closure and put down out candles on the pavement making a peace sign.

In the end Agata Teutsch climbs up onto an empty concrete flowerbed and announces through the loudspeaker that this is the end. Everything lasted just over an hour. Yet it turns out not to be the end in the broader perspective. The police must have heard Agata's announcement. She asks us back up a little and lay down a big peace sign out of our candles as a symbolic ending. I approach and try to put my candle on the ground. I am close to the police cordon. And then something happens that I don't understand, something

I watch as if in slow motion. Policemen in armor from head to toe move forward and start picking out people from the crowd. Some of us retreat. I am right at the front so I fall into the antiterrorist gentlemen's arms right away. They grab whoever they can. I feel hypnotized because I don't understand a thing. Surely they knew this was the end, that we were making the peace sign and leaving. That was the very moment they descended on us. This doesn't make any sense, I think as I am escorted to the police van. From the corner of my eye I see them dragging someone by their clothes. I try to think rationally and I ask "my" policeman what his name is, but he won't talk. Eventually, he spits out a series of numbers while I pull out a piece of paper and try to write them down. It's hard but I manage to scribble something (83686). Some big fish inside the van asks for my name and then asks who brought me. "Wilkowski," my policeman introduces himself. "So you do have a name," I say.

They herd eight of us into the van. Locked in, we look at each other, confused about what is going on. Why all the fuss? We try to joke. Our cellphones start ringing. At one point, all of us, packed tight, sit there with cellphones pressed to our ears, reporting what happened. We find out that out in the street things are still hot and the round-up is still going on. The guy opposite me says that someone hit him in the face as he was dragged to the van.

We are sitting in the corridor of the police station in Marcinkowskiego Street. Suddenly we realize that there are only five of us; the other three have disappeared. "They have been taken elsewhere," say the policemen watching us. Not being experienced protesters, we don't quite know how to act. We start exchanging cellphone numbers to find out later if everyone got out safely. One of the arrested, Agnieszka, calls friends and asks them to feed her hamster because we don't know how long this will take. We smoke. An important-looking woman in civilian clothes tells us sharply to stop smoking. "But there is an ashtray full of butts here," we say. "It's not for you, she screams." "So who is it for?" we ask. She doesn't answer and disappears behind the door of her office. Unfortunately I did not manage to get her name.

One by one, the people are taken through various strange doors, interrogated, and charged. I go in last so I get to talk with a guy who has already come out. I ask, "How was it?" "Charged with participating in an illegal gathering. It might come in handy," he says. "I wanted to apply for asylum in Canada anyway (claiming persecution on the basis of sexual orientation)." I start feeling weird. What next? Several times during the evening I hear that it's time to get out of this country.

Then it's my turn to be interrogated and hear the charges. I stupidly

confirm my participation. Later, I learn that we should have acted like the anarchists (they were experienced, I was green): say nothing, sign nothing.

I am still in a state of shock and behave like a mindless automaton, but I'm surprised that they ask me about my income. It dawns on me that now they want to drag us to court and make us pay a fine big enough to put us off demonstrating for good.

Outside the police station in Marcinkowskiego Street there is a picket line. Someone is holding up a sign. Those who were arrested come out. They look very moved. I find out that several dozen people were arrested, including some who were very young: university and high-school students. It would be good to know how many football hooligans, and others who had been shouting fascist slogans, the police had put under arrest (I certainly didn't see a single one at the police station). A policeman announces over the loudspeaker that we are supposed to disperse because this gathering is also illegal. That's easier said than done, since a group of skinheads is prowling about and walking away alone does not seem like a good idea. But the police are not interested.

We move a short distance away, to where a Polish TV van is parked. A police spokesperson is expected. I would gladly stay to hear why, when the demonstration was almost over, the police pounced on us, but I doubt whether the spokesperson is going to talk about this. I've had enough. Instead, I call friends and arrange a meeting.

That evening we end up in Kafe Mięsna, where the feminist rap group Duldung was scheduled to play and where the conclusion of the day's events was to take place. I learn more facts and see a few things on TV. At the end of the demonstration the police started to pull people out from the crowd. Some sat down on the ground in groups. Guys with woolen caps pulled over their faces yanked people away from these groups and dragged them over the ground to police vans. They ripped someone's clothes, they hit someone over the head with a truncheon; someone else lost a backpack. It looked like a nightmare because the demonstration had been absolutely peaceful; not a single window got broken. Whoever was caught between the two police cordons was in for it. I see it as symbolic that the police took pleasure in kicking over the candles arranged in the peace sign. No less symbolic was the fact that someone later rearranged the peace sign.

I am writing this down because I am still in shock as I try to understand whet happened. Yes, Mayor Grobelny did ban the demonstration, breaking the constitutional right of public assembly. When doing this he claimed that he will not permit any demonstration that might

disrupt public order (yet he does not ban football matches where fights are common). I cannot understand what happened because I know that there had been negotiations with the police before the march and a consensus had been reached. Things took a sharp turn when Grobelny issued the ban and the police suddenly announced that the march was a threat to public safety (Marta Jermaczek has written about this in a letter to the national daily Gazeta Wyborcza). I am convinced that the signal to break up the end of a peaceful - if illegal - demonstration by force must have come "from above," to show who is in charge. I am also certain that this is not the end: we are facing trial and a fine. I won't forget the sight of the police in heavy armor, yanking people out of the crowd and dragging high-school students along the pavement. Neither will I forget the moment of hesitation on the part of the police when the crowd started shouting: ZOMO (riot police during martial law in the 1980s).

I have been to several marches in my life, including two that were illegal. I remember someone telling me that we should keep going while we still can.

We no longer can.

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